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ABSTRACT

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THE RELATIONSHIP OF CONGRUENCE OF SPOUSES' PERSONAL CONSTRUCTS AND REPORTED MARITAL SUCCESS[1]

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Abstract

Based on Kelly's theory of Personal Constructs, it was hypothesized that there is a positive relationship between the degree of congruence of spouses Personal Constructs (PCs) and their reported marital success. Twenty-four couples, married from 6 months to 31 years, volunteered as Ss. To assess PCs, each S was administered a 40-dimension scale from which he was to choose the 10 dimensions most useful to him in describing other people. Marital success was evaluated by use of the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test. Correlations indicated no significant relationship between the number of shared PCs and marital adjustment scores for male or female Ss. Further examination of the data suggested that certain methodological difficulties may have obscured the results.

THE RELATIONSHIP OF CONGRUENCE OF SPOUSES' PERSONAL CONSTRUCTS AND REPORTED MARITAL SUCCESS

Hypotheses and studies relevant to factors contributing to marital success have most frequently been generated from clinical evidence, or from common-sense notions based in the investigator's experience. It is therefore not surprising that there has been a proliferation of research in this problem-area with little resulting commonality or unity. It is suggested that a more fruitful approach to the understanding of marital success may be to derive testable hypotheses from personality theory.

The present study, therefore, represents an attempt to investigate the relationship of a theoretically-derived personality variable and marital success. The variable examined was the Personal Construct (Kelly, 1955). A Personal Construct (PC) is defined as:

> "...a way in which some things are seen as being alike and yet different from others. A construct is therefore essentially a two-ended affair, involving a particular basis for considering likenesses and differences and at the same time for excluding certain things as irrelevant to the contrast involved (Bannister and Mair, 1968, p. 25)."

Personal Constructs are thus bipolar dichotomous abstractions (e.g. powerful--weak, kind--cruel, happy--sad) along which one ascribes meaning to the world. Particularly important are "role constructs" with which an individual describes and evaluates important persons in his life. Kelly states, "To the extent that one person employs a construction of experience which is similar to that employed by another, his processes are psychologically similar to those of the other person (Bannister and Mair, 1968, p. 23)." More or less coherent systems of such processes limit and guide behavioral

interactions of individuals. One might expect that spouses' sharing such psychologically similar processes may be a necessary, but probably not sufficient condition for mutually perceived successful interactions or happiness.

This contention is supported by two recent studies (Landfield and Nawas, 1964; Ourth and Landfield, 1965) which have examined the relationship between therapist-client agreement on PCs and success in psychotherapy. Their results indicate that improvement in psychotherapy is related to the degree of congruence of the PCs of therapist and client, either at the outset of therapy or as a result of a shift in the PCs of one or both of the participants.

The literature on spouses' personality or attitude "homogamy" is relevant also to a focus on the congruence of spouses' PCs. In his comprehensive review of marriage research, Tharp (1963) observes:

> "...the organizing issue in all mating research has remained the same, namely, the degree of similarity between husbands and wives. That is, do "likes marry likes" (homogamy), or do "unlikes" marry (heterogamy) (p. 97)?"

Several studies have reported positive correlations between scores on measures of marital adjustment and the degree of similarity between spouses' self-ratings on personality traits (e.g. Preston, Peltz, Mudd, and Froscher, 1952; Dymond, 1954; Corsini, 1956b). There is also some indication that spouses' similarity on "healthy" personality traits is positively correlated with marital success (Pickford, Signori, and Rempel, 1966), while spouses' similarity on "unhealthy" or neurotic personality traits is negatively correlated with marital success (Tharp, 1963). Albert (1967) notes that commonality in attitudes is also important in strengthening marital accomodation.

In almost all such studies, however, the correlations observed have been only low to moderate. It is speculated that spouses' personality homogamy may account for more of the variability in marital success than these studies indicate. For example, two marriage partners could share the PC of dominant--submissive. Yet if one were to score (or rate himself) as dominant, and his spouse were to score (or rate herself) as submissive this would typically be interpreted as an example of the spouses' personality dissimilarity. The essential congruence of the spouses on the underlying PC would never be noted. Thus traditional personality tests or self-rating may not reflect the possible homogamy in the manner in which spouses construe their world.

The focus of the present study, therefore, was on shared PCs. It was hypothesized that there is a positive relationship between the degree of congruence of spouses' PCs and their reported marital success.

Method

Subjects

Inquiries were sent to 282 married graduate students at a state university requesting their participation with their spouses in an evening testing session. Twenty-four of these couples, representing 11 graduate departments, volunteered as Subjects. Their length of marriage ranged from 6 months to 31 years, with a median of 4 years. A written free-response question revealed no common motive for volunteering which would differentiate the Subjects from the population they represented.

Instruments

Personal Constructs were assessed by use of a 40-item rating scale. Each item of the scale (i.e. PC) consisted of two descriptions defining a bipolar dimension: e.g. calm--quick tempered, mature--immature, strong--weak, etc. In all cases, the "favorable" description appeared on the left end of the scale, with the "unfavorable" description on the right. Thirty-one of the items were adapted from Landfield's (1955) listing of bipolar dimensions used by university students in construing their social environment. The remaining nine items were adapted from those presented by Weigel (1967). Subjects were instructed to mark the 10 dimensions which they found most meaningful in describing other people, taking care to not respond in terms of desirable or undesirable characteristics.

Marital success was evaluated by use of the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (1959). This instrument is composed of 15 of the discriminating items from a number of established tests of marital adjustment. Tharp (1963) comments that "...11 of the 15 items seem related to social emotional integration via agreement and togetherness (p. 112)."

Procedure

Each of the 48 Subjects independently completed the two instruments during a single testing session. In all cases the Personal Construct instrument was administered before the Locke-Wallace scale.

Each individual's score on the Locke-Wallace scale was regarded as a measure of his (or her) perceived marital success. The congruence of spouses' PCs was determined for each couple by computing the number of items that both members of the couple chose as among the 10 most

meaningful. In addition, a control group of 24 couples were formed by randomly pairing the 24 male and 24 female Subjects (as suggested by Corsini, 1956b). A measure of shared PCs was determined in the same manner for "random" couples as for "real" couples.

Data Analysis and Results

Pearson Product-Moment correlations indicated no significant relationship between the number of shared PCs and Locke-Wallace scores for male ($r = .06$, $p > .05$) or for female ($r = .24$, $p > .05$) members of "real" couples. A Pearson Product-Moment correlation of individual Locke-Wallace scores of males and female members of "real" couples indicated no significant relationship between their scores on this instrument ($r = .20$, $p > .05$). A t-test indicated no significant differences between the number of shared PCs for "real" and "random" couples ($t = 0.14$, $p > .05$).

Discussion

The study yields no evidence to support the hypothesis of a positive relationship between the degree of congruence of spouses' Personal Constructs and the reported success of their marriage. In view of these negative results, one might question that such a relationship does in fact exist. However, the data were further examined in order to determine whether the two instruments employed in the study were valid measures of the variables they were designed to evaluate. It would appear that inherent in both instruments are serious sources of invalidity.

The Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test was evaluated by determining the correlation of male and female spouses' scores. The

results of this correlation indicated no significant relationship to be present. Because of this lack of agreement in spouses' perceptions of their marital adjustment, the validity of the instrument must be questioned. Surprisingly, Corsini (1956a) reports a correlation of .82 (N = 20) between spouses' scores on a happiness-in-marriage questionnaire devised by Burgess and Wallin (1953), from which a number of items on the Locke-Wallace scale were derived. By contrast, Hurley and Silvert (1966) summarize the results of a number of studies which show very low correlations between marital adjustment scores of marriage partners on several different instruments. The results of the present study support their conclusion that "...there is a need for clarification of conflicting reports and for greater sophistication about the methods of marital adjustment measurement (p. 220)." This need for improved instrumentation is particularly crucial in light of Tharp's (1963) and Albert's (1967) reports of the many researchers who are continuing to use the Locke-Wallace or similar measures of marital adjustment.

The Personal Construct instrument was explored by testing for potential differences in the number of shared PCs of "real" and "random" couples. The finding of no significant differences between these groups may reflect the restricted range on the instrument, which allowed a maximum of ten agreements. In future instruments, the number of possible agreements should be expanded. Another factor which may have contributed to the present results was the homogeneity of the sample of married couples examined, particularly with regard to social class and educational values and outlooks. If all Subjects did in fact share a core of common PCs, differences within or between couples

may have been obscured. Hence future research should attempt to examine a more heterogeneous sample. Finally, the findings suggest that it might be more fruitful to focus on PCs which are more pertinent to marriage roles and expectations. Bannister and Mair (1968) stress that in order to assess an individual's functioning in a given area of his life it is necessary to elicit the PCs that he personally and uniquely employs to construe events, and to insure that these PCs are those he uses to construe events and persons in this particular life area. An adaptation of Kelly's (1955) Role Construct Repertory Test might be particularly useful for eliciting the PCs an individual uses to construe persons, relationships and events in the specific area of marriage. By contrast, it appears quite likely that the PCs and instructions presented to the Subjects in the present study led them to select PCs more pertinent to construing people in general than those related to marriage itself.

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